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ABSTRACT

The determination of whether school social status is independently associated with college aspirations among a sample of white high school seniors was the purpose of this study. The sample was composed of 6,127 white 1967 graduating seniors in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area high schools. College aspirations were measured in terms of college expectations by asking respondents to indicate whether they were seriously considering entering college the following year. The socioeconomic status for individual students was determined from their answers to four questions that provided information along 5-point scales concerned with the educational level of the household head, father's or household head's occupation, respondent's estimate of number of books in the house, and a description of family finance. The school social status was determined by classifying public high schools according to the occupational distribution of the families of the graduating seniors who were included in the study. Study findings are provided. (JF)

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THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL STATUS ON COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS AMONG WHITE SENIORS IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS OF A METROPOLITAN AREA

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One of the most important issues in educational research has centered on the controversy concerning the effects which social class segregation of schools in metropolitan areas may have on students from low status families. Researchers have tried to determine whether attendance at schools in which most of the students are low in social status constitutes an additional disadvantage over and beyond the direct association between social class and educational performance per se. Since aspirations for further education provide an indication of whether youth are being motivated to achieve educational and social mobility through the schools, college aspirations frequently have been utilized to determine whether school social status has an independent effect on the motivation of students in the public schools.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether school social status is associated with college aspirations among a sample of 6,127 white students who were graduating seniors at high schools in the Kansas

City Metropolitan Area in 1967.[1] Several studies (Wilson, 1959; Hauser, 1969; Mayeske, et al., 1969) have concluded that the social status of high schools is positively associated with college expectations and college attendance plans after controls are imposed for the social class background of individual students; other studies (Sewell and Armer, 1966; McDill, Rigsby, and Meyers, 1969) have reported that school social status has no independent effect on college aspirations after account is taken of individual social status. Still other types of studies (Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf, 1970) have shown that the influence of "significant others" is an important determinant of educational aspirations, thus providing a rationale for explaining how school social status might exert an influence on college expectations.

Boyle (1966) reviewed the research literature available up to 1966 and concluded that studies conducted in large urban centers in which social stratification is relatively massive and clearly delineated along geographical lines generally have shown an independent association between school social status and educational achievement and aspirations. This suggests that in studies conducted in smaller, less stratified communities or in studies which cut across regional lines without

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[1]The data in this study are part of a larger report on the college attendance plans of 11,328 students who were graduating seniors in 1967. This sample constituted approximately 75% of all the graduating seniors in Kansas City area high schools in 1967. Parts of the larger study and the analysis of data were co-sponsored by the Kansas City Regional Council on Higher Education, the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory, and the Phi Delta Kappa Commission on Higher Education. The study was carried out at the Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in Education, School of Education, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

allowing for intra-regional comparisons, samples apparently are not sufficiently stratified or the effects of school social status are too obscured to allow for the emergence of an independent association between school status and educational aspirations. If Boyle's explanation is correct, school social status should be positively associated with college aspirations in a study such as the present one which dealt with a large sample of students within one of the nation's larger urban regions.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to determine whether school social status is independently associated with college aspirations among a sample of white seniors at high schools in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area in 1967.

College Aspirations were measured in terms of college expectations by asking respondents to indicate whether they were seriously considering entering college the following year.

Socioeconomic status for individual students was determined from their answers to four questions which provided information along five-point scales concerned with educational level of the head of household, occupation of father or head of household, respondent's estimate of number of books in the house, and a description of family finances. A formula which weighted occupation level as 3, educational level as 2, and the other two variables as 1 was used to derive a social-class

score for each respondent. Based on these social status scores, respondents then were classified into one of five social class (SES) categories ranging from 1 (upper class) to 5 (lower working class).

School social status was determined by classifying public high schools according to the occupational distribution of the families of the graduating seniors who were included in the study. This was done by computing the Socio-Economic Ratio (Havighurst, 1964) from the formula $SER = \frac{2A-B}{c-2D}$ where

A = Professional occupations

B = Salesmen (large orders on expensive merchandise), managers or owners of large businesses or farms, technical workers, office personnel, school teachers.

C = Government employees, firemen, policemen, skilled or highly trained workers, self-employed in small businesses or small farms.

D = Service workers; barbers, beauticians, waitresses, factory workers, sales workers in small stores and shops, farm laborers, semi-skilled and unskilled laborers.

Data in the study were collected from seniors at 61 high schools in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area. Twenty-eight schools could not be appropriately compared on social status with the others because they were very small rural or semi-rural schools or were parochial schools; placing these twenty-eight schools in separate categories left 33 public high schools which were placed in the three social status categories "Middle Class," "Comprehensive," and "Working Class" (hereafter generally referred to as MC, C, and WC Schools, respectively).

Two-thirds of the respondents in the three MC Schools were in SES 1 and 2. Between thirty and forty percent of the respondents in the twenty-three C Schools were in each of the SES groupings 1 and 2, 3, 4 and 5, respectively. More than fifty-five percent of the respondents in the seven WC Schools were in SES 4 and 5. Three of the WC Schools were attended primarily by black students; hence the present study reports results only for the four WC Schools which were attended primarily by white students.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the percentages of seniors from each SES category in the three types of schools who said they were expecting to enroll in college during the year following graduation. In order to avoid

Insert Table 1 about here

confounding the comparisons by introducing variables with an unknown influence on college aspirations, only the questionnaires filled out by white seniors in schools sampled in the spring (rather than the fall) of 1967 were used in comparing the college expectations of students in differing types of schools.

In Table 1 and later tables, comparisons are shown for males and females separately and no data are reported when fewer than twenty respondents were available in adjacent schools (i.e. MC Schools compared with C Schools; C Schools compared with WC Schools).

TABLE 1

Percentages of Seniors Expecting to Enroll in College,
by Family Social Class, Sex, and Type of School

TYPE OF SCHOOL

	Males						Females					
	Middle Class		Comprehensive		Working Class		Middle Class		Comprehensive		Working Class	
Family Social Class	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
SES 1	89	(240)	82	(288)	----	----	85	(224)	78	(251)	----	----
SES 2	87	(247)***	73	(382)	77	(35)	87	(232)***	64	(361)**	38	(47)
SES 3	84	(202)***	67	(741)	58	(110)	77	(208)***	56	(749)	46	(119)
SES 4	75	(36)**	46	(536)	39	(176)	64	(33)**	35	(540)*	25	(171)
SES 5	--	---	28	(65)	31	(36)	--	----	16	(74)	21	(24)

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* Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .05 level.

** Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .01 level.

***Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .001 level.

The data in Table 1 generally confirm the findings of previous investigators who have reported a positive association between school social status and college aspirations. With family social class equated, students in MC Schools are more likely to plan on attending college than are students in C Schools, and students in the C Schools more frequently plan on attending college than do students in the WC Schools. All eight of the comparisons between MC and C Schools favor the MC Schools, and seven of the eight are statistically significant at the .05 level. Of the eight comparisons between C Schools and WC Schools, five favor the C Schools and three favor the WC Schools[2]; all three of the statistically significant differences favor the C Schools. The average, equal-weighted percentage for the MC Schools is 81%, as compared with 55% for the C Schools and 36% for the WC Schools, thus underlining the strong association which exists between school social status and expectations for college attendance among students of a given social class.

When SES 1 and 2 respondents and SES 4 and 5 respondents are combined to obtain larger numbers of respondents in the smaller cells, an interesting pattern emerges which is shown in Table 2. All the differences favor the high status schools, and seven of the twelve

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[2]Two of the three comparisons which favor the WC Schools occur among the SES 5 males and females. One possible reason why college expectations among SES 5 students depart from the general trend shown between C Schools and WC Schools is that only the most persistent and education-oriented SES 5 students may be staying through the senior year in working class schools. Another possibility is that working class schools may have more permissive academic standards which make college seem more feasible for very low-status graduates.

Insert Table 2 About Here

differences are statistically significant at or beyond the .001 level. For males but not for females, the spread between SES 1 and 2 respondents and SES 4 and 5 respondents expecting to go to college is larger in the WC Schools than the C Schools (for males, 39 percentage points in the WC column versus 13 percentage points in the MC column, as compared with corresponding differences for females of 21 and 22 percentage points). This pattern suggests that school social status has differential importance for the two sexes. In general, it agrees with Sewell and Armer's (1966) finding that "neighborhood context is associated more with the educational aspirations of girls than boys," perhaps because "high socioeconomic status parents who place a high value on college education for their daughters are likely to insist on living in high status neighborhoods where their daughters can attend superior schools" or because educational attainment is less salient for girls and therefore they are "more susceptible to the influences of the social milieu" (pp. 166-167).

Because previous research has indicated that one of the most important variables influencing college aspirations is parental influence and encouragement to attend college (Simpson, 1962), it is desirable to control for parental influence before concluding that school social status is independently associated with aspirations. To control for parental influence, students were asked to respond to the item, "How

TABLE 2

Percentages of Seniors Expecting to Enroll in College, by Collapsed Family Social Class Groups, Sex, and Type of School

	TYPE OF SCHOOL											
	Males						Females					
	Middle Class		Comprehensive		Working Class		Middle Class		Comprehensive		Working Class	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
Family Social Class												
SES 1 and 2	88	(487)***	78	(670)	76	(45)	86	(456)***	70	(611)***	46	(59)
SES 3	84	(202)***	67	(741)	58	(110)	77	(208)***	56	(749)	46	(119)
SES 4 and 5	75	(36)***	44	(601)	37	(212)	64	(33)***	32	(614)*	25	(195)

* Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .05 level.

** Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .01 level.

*** Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .001 level.

would your parents feel about your going to college?" Response categories were: "They have always expected me to go;" "They want me to go;" "They don't care either way;" "They don't want me to go, or would rather I didn't;" and "They refuse to consider it." Table 3 shows the percentages of respondents classified by SES and parental influence response in the three types of schools who expected to go to college the following year. As might be expected, only a handful

Insert Table 3 About Here

of the graduating seniors in our sample reported that their parents didn't want them to go to college or discouraged their college plans; for this reason too few respondents were available in these response categories to allow for comparisons between types of schools. In addition when respondents were classified both by SES and parental influence, too few respondents remained in SES 5 groups to allow for comparisons between groups of students with this family background.

One striking pattern immediately apparent in Table 3 is the strong association between perceived parental influence and college expectations. Among respondents who perceived their parents as "always expected me to go" to college, the lowest percentage of respondents in any SES group who expected to attend college was 77%, whereas the highest percentage among any SES group in which respondents perceived their parents as not caring "either way" was 35%. Among SES 4 males who said their parents always had expected them to go to college, the

TABLE 3

Percentages of Seniors Expecting to Enroll in College, by Family Social Class, Perceived Parental Influence, and Type of School

Family Social Class	Perceived Parental Influence	Males: Middle Class %	Males: Middle Class (N)	Males: Comprehensive %	Males: Comprehensive (N)	Males: Working Class %	Males: Working Class (N)	Females: Middle Class %	Females: Middle Class (N)	Females: Comprehensive %	Females: Comprehensive (N)	Females: Working Class %	Females: Working Class (N)
SES 1	Always expected me to go to college	89	(158)	90	(163)	----	-----	93	(135)	93	(104)	---	----
SES 2		91	(129)	93	(140)	----	-----	93	(118)	84	(115)	---	----
SES 3		95	(91)	90	(248)	81	(32)	90	(80)	87	(174)	---	----
SES 4		---	----	82	(85)	77	(26)	---	----	---	-----	---	----
SES 1	Want me to go	88	(68)	80	(89)	---	----	82	(68)	86	(98)	---	----
SES 2		84	(101)**	66	(200)	---	----	91	(86)***	66	(171)*	42	(24)
SES 3		78	(97)**	60	(374)	56	(54)	80	(90)**	63	(358)	58	(53)
SES 4		--	----	49	(319)	40	(93)	---	----	50	(230)	38	(64)
SES 2	Don't care either way	---	----	---	---	---	----	35	(20)	18	(49)	---	---
SES 3		---	----	---	---	---	----	35	(23)	16	(165)	20	(36)
SES 4		---	----	11	(96)	21	(34)	--	----	10	(189)	8	(71)

* Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .05 level.
** Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .01 level.
*** Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .001 level.

percentage (81%) who said they expected to attend college was nearly six times as large as the comparable percentage (14%) among SES 4 males who said their parents did not care either way. The average equal-weighted percentage for all students whose parents always expected them to attend college was 91%, as compared with 63% for students who say their parents want them to attend college and 19% for students who say their parents don't care either way. This precipitous drop lends support for Rehberg and Westby's (1967) conclusion that "parental encouragement comes close to being a necessary condition for the continuation of education beyond the high school level. . ." (p.375).

Examining the differences in Table 3 between percentages of respondents at the three types of schools who expected to enroll in college, it was found that with two exceptions there was a fairly consistent trend for respondents at the higher status schools to be more expectant of entering college than were respondents at the lower status schools. Of the fourteen comparisons between MC and C Schools, in nine cases percentages for MC students were higher by at least five percentage points than were percentages for the C students, and four of these differences were statistically significant at or beyond the .05 level. On no comparison were percentages for the C students as much as five percentage points higher than for the MC students.

Of the ten cpmparisons between the C and WC Schools, percentages for the C students were at least five percentage points higher than percentages for the WC students in six cases; in only one case was the

percentage for the WC students at least five points higher than the corresponding percentage for the C students. The only statistically significant difference favored the C students.

The two exceptions which can be discerned to this pattern are that (1) among SC 1-3 respondents who said their parents "always have expected me to go to college, there was relatively little apparent difference between the MC and C Schools, and (2) among SC 3-4 respondents who said their parents "didn't care either way," there was no consistent difference in favor of students in the C Schools as compared with the WC Schools. These results suggest that students whose family environment is strongly supportive of educational attainment may not receive any special benefit in terms of educational aspirations by attending a higher status school and that students whose family environment is unusually little supportive may not suffer any extra handicap by attending a working class school.

In interpreting the data in Table 3 as well as other data in this study, it should be kept in mind that our sample was limited to high school seniors and that a large percentage of youth - particularly low status students in low status schools - already have dropped out of school by that time. Partly for this reason and partly because high schools in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area tend to be stratified along socioeconomic lines, we were able to make only a few comparisons either between lower status students from relatively supportive families or

between higher status students from relatively unsupportive families. It also should be kept in mind that our data are derived from student reports rather than interviews with parents or other potentially more accurate methods for assessing parental influence and that one would expect most high school seniors to perceive at least minimal parental encouragement even where such encouragement may be mostly pro forma. It is possible that the conclusions suggested by our data might be appreciably modified if a longitudinal sample were obtained that allowed one to study changes in aspirations during students' high school careers and to assess parental influence more adequately than is possible by administering questionnaires to high school seniors.

Even though the data reported above clearly support the conclusion that school social status has an independent effect on educational aspirations, it is still possible that families which live in one type of community and send their children to one type of school differ in important respects which are not tapped by our parental influence item from families of similar socioeconomic status who live elsewhere and send their children to another type of school. It is quite possible, for example, that lower-middle-class families who live in predominantly upper-middle-class areas have made it a point to move there in order to enroll their children in middle class schools; if so, differences in the aspirations of similar-status children in differing types of schools might primarily reflect differences in family values rather than school social status.

The only previous research we could find which tried to control for intra-class family variables in making comparisons to assess the relationship between school social status and college aspiration is Wilson's (1959) study of white male students in eight high schools in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area. By classifying each subject according to mother's education as well as father's education and occupation, Wilson was able to make comparisons between groups of students of similar social class (as indicated by data on the father) but different family background (as indicated by education of the mother) in three types of schools classified by social composition. These comparisons suggested that school social status is an important factor that affects students' aspirations: "The de facto segregation brought about by concentrations of social classes in cities results in schools with unequal moral climates which likewise affect the motivation of the child. . ." (p. 845).

In the present study we had a large enough sample to pick out groups of students categorized not just by father's social class and mother's education (as Wilson did), but to make comparisons between groups of students whose fathers were in similar-status occupations and had similar levels of education and whose mothers had more education than their fathers. Especially since mother's education is known to be an important variable affecting educational orientations and aspirations, we considered that families characterized in this manner were particularly distinctive as regards variables affecting college aspirations

and that differences in the aspirations of their children could most legitimately be attributed to school social status. We regard this set of comparisons between students from families characterized in this way in the three types of schools as the best test in our own data of the hypothesis that school social status plays an important part in determining college aspirations. The results of these comparisons are shown in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 About Here

As shown in Table 4, six of the seven comparisons between MC Schools and C Schools favor the MC Schools by at least five percentage points, and four of these differences are significant at or beyond the .05 level. Three of the four comparisons favor the C Schools over the WC Schools by at least five percentage points; in the remaining comparison the difference between groups of students in the C Schools and WC Schools is only two percentage points. These data add further support for the conclusion that attendance at a lower rather than a higher status school is detrimental to the educational aspirations of students in large, relatively stratified urban areas.

DISCUSSION

Data were collected on the college aspirations of male and female white seniors in middle-class, comprehensive, and working-class schools in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area in the spring of 1967. In agreement

TABLE 4

Percentages of Seniors Expecting to Enroll in College, by Family Background Combinations, Sex, and Type of School

	TYPE OF SCHOOL											
	Males						Females					
	Middle Class		Comprehensive		Working Class		Middle Class		Comprehensive		Working Class	
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)
Maternal Education Father's occupation Father's education												
College Graduate												
Salesman, sales worker government employee, or office worker Less than high school graduate	96	(50)*	78	(41)	---	---	84	(31)	93	(30)	---	---
Self-employed in small business, skilled worker, or technical work Less than high school graduate	91	(22)	85	(20)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
High School Graduate or Some College												
Salesman, sales worker, government employee, or office worker Less than high school graduate	79	(101)	73	(212)	57	(21)	94	(47)***	67	(114)	52	(27)
Self-employed in small business, skilled worker, or technical work Less than high school graduate	88	(51)**	66	(122)	---	---	83	(121)***	52	(205)	---	---
Service worker or factory worker Less than high school graduation	---	---	52	(152)	46	(46)	---	---	41	(162)	43	(49)

* Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .05 level.
** Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .01 level.
*** Differences between adjacent types of schools significant at the .001 level.

with other studies which have taken a large urban area as the unit of analysis, comparison of college expectation rates with social class and family background variables controlled indicated that type of high school (as portrayed in terms of socioeconomic composition) has an independent effect on plans to attend college.

The analysis of data performed in this paper does not permit us to make a precise estimate of the degree to which the socioeconomic composition of differing types of high schools in a sizable metropolitan area serves to increase or depress the college aspirations of the students who attend them. However, we can obtain a very rough estimate by reviewing the data in Table 1 and computing equal-weighted differences between middle class and comprehensive schools and between comprehensive and working class schools. Computed separately for males and females and excluding differences among SES 5 students and among SES 1 students (because of the very small numbers of SES 5 students in middle class schools and SES 1 students in working class schools), these figures bearing on the influence of school type on college aspirations are as follows:

	Males	Females
Middle Class	82	76
Comprehensive	65	52
Working Class	58	36

In agreement with the finding of previous research, these rough estimates suggest that school type has a slightly greater effect on the aspirations of females than of males, probably because a college career tends to be more vital for the future success of males than females (Sewell and Armer, 1966). For students attending middle class schools as compared with comprehensive schools, the differences appear to be much greater than those found between comprehensive and working class schools.

At this point one is compelled to consider whether these results are large enough to be of practical importance. Granted that attending a middle class school apparently gives students a substantial advantage over students of similar background who attend a comprehensive school; still, there are relatively few middle class schools, only a relatively small proportion of students can attend them before they cease to be middle class schools. The advantage to students of similar background in attending a comprehensive school as compared with a working class school may be only about five or ten percentage points. Is this a large enough difference to occasion concern about the effects of neighborhood and community stratification on the educational opportunities available to students in differing parts of the metropolitan area?

For several reasons we believe that it is. For one thing, a difference of only five or six percentage points in favor of students in the comprehensive school actually gives it a differential nearly 10 percent

greater than the working class school in terms of the relative levels of college aspirations in the two types of schools (e.g. a percentage of 55 is 10 percent greater than a percentage of 50).

More important, it also must be remembered that our data deal only with aspirations among graduating seniors, and thus do not take into account the entire school career of students from kindergarten through twelfth grade and particularly the differentials in dropout rates that may be associated with differences in school type. Although we do not have data on the dropout rates in the schools in our sample that would allow us to estimate the effects of school type or holding power with individual social background of students controlled, we suspect that the same school climate factors that depress aspirations also operate to increase the dropout rate.

In addition to the direct effects of school type on aspirations and dropout rate, previous research indicates that school type indirectly affects college-going patterns in other ways as well. Coleman and Campbell, et al. (1966), Wilson (1969), and others have found that social status of the school is associated with academic achievement; it is probable, in turn, that students who achieve well in a given school are more likely to have high college aspirations than similar status students who achieve poorly (Sewell, et al., 1970). When the indirect as well as the direct effects of school social status on educational aspirations are taken into consideration, it is probable

that low status students who attend predominantly working class schools thereby suffer an important disadvantage in educational aspirations over and beyond the economic and educational disadvantages they incur simply by being born into low status families.

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